



long-time supporter of McQuay who bought several of his books for Headline, including the complex near-future novel *The Nexus* (1989), which Evans praises highly. And McQuay's last work is a Gollancz project:

Richter Ten (Gollancz, £15.99), credited as by Arthur C. Clarke and Mike McQuay. This novel was developed from an 850-word movie outline by Clarke, with Clarke subsequently overseeing the development of McQuay's material.

Richter Ten is a near-future novel of earthquakes: their consequences, prediction and, perhaps, prevention. Lewis Crane is a child when his parents are killed by the LA earthquake of 1994. Thirty years later he has developed a new theory of quakes, based on worldwide data-pooling and a kind of eco-earthquake holistic philosophy of the Earth.

Crane has a vision of avoiding quake damage by precise predictions – and perhaps, in the longer term, preventing quakes altogether by stitching together the continental plates with huge fusion blasts (!). This, it seems, is the core of Clarke's original idea, and it is traditionally Clarkeian: the possibilities of science and technology turned rationally, on a worldwide scale, to the betterment of mankind. (Remember the asteroid watch in *Rendezvous with Rama*?)

But *Richter Ten* is much more McQuay's book than Clarke's. And so Clarke's vision is thrust into a typical McQuay near-future scenario. The world – in particular America – is run by Chinese-controlled corporations, uniformly corrupt, and America is splitting along religious and ethnic fault lines. This is the arena in which Crane, metamorphosed into a McQuay competent-man hero up against the odds, must struggle to achieve his vision – and struggle he does, against a background of bigger and ever more devastating quakes.

The research into earthquake science and lore, I guess largely by McQuay, is fine, well delivered and focused. And this is no simple thriller; McQuay explores with much intelligence the deeper ethical consequences of powers like quake prediction. It's a little hard to see how all this could be made into a hit movie, however. The multiple catastrophes keep the pages turning in the novel, but they tend to diffuse the sense of threat; the great disaster movies – like *Earthquake* itself (1974) – focused on the impact of a single dramatic event. Still, an *Earthquake* updated with modern special effects would be intriguing...

Although much of the well-worked-out near-future scenario seems squarely aimed at flaws in the modern American psyche, and is the more pleasing for that – the suffusion with

drugs and IT, the social collapse, nothing growing except under parasols, the Chinese corporate logos projected on the Moon – I did feel uneasy at times with the depiction of non-Americans, who are pretty uniformly shown as loathsome and corrupt: "Liang Int [a Chinese corporation] owned it all and ran it all... including the so-called Government of the United States of America..." "The Germans ... exhibited the kind of authoritarianism that made her father fear a concentration camp was being built around every corner..." Such language is a long way from classic Arthur Clarke. The book also sometimes descends to the sentimental: "Lanie [one of the world's top information technologists] ... had to laugh at herself. Being a thoroughly happy bride and mother-to-be must make her giddy" (bleagh!).

I have to admit, too, to a deeper problem with the basic Clarkeian idea. I'm not at all sure that stitching up the plates would be a good idea anyhow! – for we may need the geology. Many of the major elements needed for the biosynthesis of cell components are absorbed, on long-enough timescales, by surface reservoirs on the Earth. So we need crustal rocks to be recycled to release biogenic materials back into the atmosphere. Earth's active plate tectonics makes this long-term cycling possible; stopping it would be a seriously dumb idea, if we want the Earth to stay habitable over million-year periods or more! Knowing this drastically reduces our sympathy for Crane – perhaps he really is a Mad Scientist – and we have, reluctantly, to cheer his opponents who, for whatever venal motives, obstruct his more grandiose and foolish schemes.

But these cavils are minor. *Richter Ten* is lively, exciting and competent. It is a satisfactory fusion of Clarke's vision with McQuay's crackling style. And, more than that, the book contains some fine and thoughtful passages: McQuay's remarkable depiction of the solitary confinement of one character, late in the novel, is particularly memorable. This novel is triumphantly a Mike McQuay book; it seems destined to sell well, and to bring McQuay's name, fittingly, to a wider audience.

Stephen Baxter

Johnny Who?

David V. Barrett

HarperCollins are really going to town on William Gibson. There was the "Special Tenth Anniversary Edition" in hardback of his first novel, *Neuromancer*, in late 1994, and now there's not only Terry Bisson's novelization (£4.99) of the film *Johnny Mnemonic*, scripted by Gibson and loosely based on his original short story of the same name, but also a glossy book (6"x9" pbk, £7.99) with the script, the short story, and 16 pages of stills from the film. Is it all worth it, one asks oneself. Well, the novel's not bad, but I seriously can't see anyone buying the script.

There's something curiously old-fashioned about Gibsonian cyberpunk, whether written by him or by Terry Bisson. Most other cyberpunk gives a feeling of the near-future; the resonances in *Johnny Mnemonic* are all of the near-past, particularly of our perceived reality (no doubt quite different from the actual reality) of 1940s gangsterland. Gibson/Bisson's Yakuza – baddies of the good old-fashioned sort: inscrutable and slant-eyed – are simply the Mafia; their suits are just as sharp, their internal discipline and "honour" just as strong, their weaponry just as vicious, their dispensing of death just as brutal. Even their position in society is analogous: "A hush fell over the lobby as they came through the revolving door, one after the other; then the rattle and hum resumed as everyone pretended not to notice who, or rather *what*, had just entered. Yakuza. Those it is never wise to notice... Everyone in the lobby knew who they were. Everyone knew they were looking for someone and everyone hoped it was someone else. Everyone in the lobby avoided eye contact with them..." (pp 21, 38; references are to the Bisson noveliza-

The Dying Fall

J. G. Ballard



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